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E.O. 12958: DECL: 8/7/2019
 TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [PK](#)
 SUBJECT: PROSECUTIONS AND PEACE PROMISED IN STRIFE-TORN VILLAGE

REF: A. LAHORE 158
[1](#)B. LAHORE 162

CLASSIFIED BY: Matthew Lowe, Acting Principal Officer, Consulate
 Lahore, U.S. Department of State.
 REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: While politicians and religious leaders have sought to establish inter-religious peace in Gojra village after the August 1 burning of eight Christians, human rights activists have urged the government to reconsider the blasphemy law, which sparked the killing of a Muslim businessman in Sheikhpura August 4. In an August 6 meeting with A/PO, members of the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan warned that the government must punish the perpetrators, and suggested modifying the blasphemy law that allows such incidents to occur. Maulana Abdul Khabeer Azad, the imam of Lahore's Badshahi Mosque, related that he spent the week in Gojra encouraging interfaith reconciliation. He underscored that extremist Brelvi group Sunni Tehreek first sparked the riot, though an Ahl-e-Hadith mosque encouraged the violence. End Summary.

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 Politicians Promise Compensation
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[1](#)2. (SBU) The August 1 riot and burning of eight Christians in Gojra village in Toba Tek Singh district in central Punjab prompted visits by Chief Minister Shahbaz Sharif, Governor Salman Taseer and Prime Minister Yusuf Gilani during week of August 3. Shahbaz and Taseer pledged assistance during separate August 4 trips to the village. Shahbaz promised to rebuild the approximately 100 houses, and announced a judicial inquiry led by a Lahore High Court tribunal. During his visit, the Governor noted that quick action by the provincial administration would have prevented the deaths. "The white stripe in our national flag clearly admits the presence of minorities and PPP will continue its struggle for their fundamental rights," he reiterated. Prime Minister Yusuf Gilani arrived August 6 and pledged 100 million rupees compensation.

[1](#)3. (SBU) The Pakistan Muslim League (PML) President Chaudhry Shujaat Hussain visited the Christian settlement August 9. He denied that any desecration took place, and backed PML Member of the National Assembly (MNA) Akram Maseeh's call to revise the blasphemy law. Shujaat Hussain also suggested providing two more seats in the Senate to minorities.

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Maulana Promotes Interfaith Harmony
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¶4. (C) Maulana Abdul Khabeer Azad, the imam of Lahore's prominent Badshahi Mosque, told Acting Principal Officer August 7 that he spent four days and nights in Gojra to reconcile the Christian and Muslim communities. During his conversations with Islamic scholars, bishops and "the masses," Maulana Azad related, he stressed that Islam respects other faiths and views the state as the exclusive arbitrator of disputes. He encouraged the local community to donate blood for the injured and food and water to the Christian community, he recounted.

¶5. (C) Maulana Azad detailed that Sunni Tehreek, an extremist Brelvi organization, triggered the first arson incident that burned about 40 houses in nearby Khorian town. He cautioned that he has refrained from accusing Sunni Tehreek publicly because his Deobandi affiliation might trigger tension between the two sects. He clarified that the August 1 mob emerged from an Ahl-e-Hadith mosque, but the masked, armed arsonists seem to have appeared separately. "We presume they came out of local houses," he surmised.

¶6. (C) Maulana Azad acknowledged that abuse of the blasphemy law has occurred, but warned that withdrawing the law would produce an increase in blasphemy incidents. But he admitted that the law has a low threshold for evidence, as illustrated in an August 5 incident in which workers in Muridke in Sheikhpura district killed their Muslim employer during a pay dispute and then told police that he had desecrated the Koran. Maulana Azad recounted that former President Musharraf had sought to discourage the registration of false cases by requiring senior police officers to file First Information Reports (FIRs) that invoke Article 295. Meanwhile, Maulana Azad briefed, he planned to return to Gojra August 10 to distribute food and essential items, and hold "peace conferences" over the following week.

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HRCP Decries Lack of Law Enforcement and Blasphemy Law
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¶7. (SBU) Mehboob Ahmed Khan of the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) told A/PO August 6 that a July 30 gathering featured speakers, including Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) and Tehreek Insaaf politicians, who called for a mob to gather August 1 to demand the arrest of Talib Singh, the Christian accused of blasphemy. Despite the announcement on July 30, he lamented, the police refused to prevent the crowd from gathering or marching the next day. The August 1 attack, Khan detailed, appeared professional. "They burned 40 houses in 30 minutes -- how did they do that?"

¶8. (SBU) Khan called for the effective prosecution of the perpetrators, and noted that banned organizations such as Lashkare-e-Jhangvi and Sipah-e-Sahaba had arrived in the village to provoke unrest. "All of these organizations are banned, but none of them are taken to task," he complained. He believed that the community had existed in harmony before "outside factors disturbed the scene."

¶9. (SBU) Khan and his HRCP colleagues underlined that the blasphemy law creates a framework that allows such incidents to occur. "Every incident is proof that it is easy to use this law for revenge," he observed. He urged that the government repeal the law, but suggested that the Interior Minister direct police to register FIRs on religious grounds only after conducting an inquiry. He highlighted that the number of blasphemy cases and the violence associated with such cases has increased in 2009.

¶10. (SBU) In an August 9 press conference, HRCP Chairperson Asma Jehangir declared that the Christians in Gojra still felt threatened by militant groups. Speaking as part of the Joint Action Committee for Peoples Rights (JAC), she demanded that the government dismantle extremist groups and take action against those who use blasphemy allegations to incite violence. The JAC also called for an early warning mechanism to prevent sectarian

conflicts and monitoring of mosque loudspeakers.

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Comment: Nerves Calm, but Tension Remains

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¶11. (C) While politicians and religious leaders have rushed to Gojra, they have done little to correct the legal and societal foundation that allowed such a horrific incident to take place. As long as the blasphemy law remains on the books, police must recognize how to prevent belief-based incidents from spiraling out of control. Raising the proof required and requiring an inquiry before the FIR will prevent false allegations from becoming official charges. The government must also punish the politicians and leaders who riled the mob in Gojra, and demonstrate that exploiting interfaith tension is a criminal offense. But the tension itself must also ease, and the dialogue and exchange led by Maulana Azad comprises one element that will help prevent faith-based riots from recurring.

LOWE